

Press Release re: Salary Commission Ballot Issue

From: Jack Hovenier 8/31/11

When I decided to ask Whatcom County decision-makers to ask voters to establish an independent salary commission to establish the wages paid to elected officials I had little idea the concept would become a politically charged issue. Had I known the ballot measure would be used to support political attacks rather than addressed in a reasoned fashion I would have waited until a non-local election year to request the concept of a salary commission be placed on the ballot.

I have long felt some elected officials are paid far more than they ought to be paid while the work horses of our governing system, our elected County Council members, are paid at near minimum wage levels when the hours of work they must put in to represent us well are considered.

When I brought forward the idea of a independent salary commission I thought the wage disparity was so obvious any reasonable person appointed to the salary commission would look to Council salaries first and conclude Executive and elected department head's salary increases should probably be put on hold. I expressed that opinion to many people including council members, friends and supporters of the idea.

Suddenly the suggestion was portrayed by some in a political light I never intended so I stopped expressing my opinion on the matter in an attempt to depoliticize the issue of a commission. Unwisely, when asked recently by a reporter about my sharing my ideas about the issue with a long time friend, Pete Kremen, I thought, "Oh, no, here come the politics," and denied having expressed my opinions by means of a message left on the Executive's phone.

Well, I got caught in a lie and that is personally embarrassing but the real issue here is, what does all this mean? Opponents to the idea of an independent commission setting salaries for elected county officials apparently like the idea that council members are forced to set salaries for themselves and for the executive offices and they like the idea that council members can never be paid fairly unless they give obscene raises to the Executive and other elected department heads.

The fact that I think council members salaries should go up is not germane. I'm only one voter out of tens of thousands who will decide the issue. It would be unethical for me, as the originator of the idea to sit on the commission so that is not an issue.

So let's take the politics out of this and let the people vote on the commission idea and then, if the people agree council members should not be forced to set their own salaries, let the commission decide what those salaries should be after a public process and public comment.

It is difficult for me, aside from the opportunity to politicize the issue of county salaries, to understand why opponents to the commission are so dead set against the idea.